Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art, philosophy and psycho-analysis –
https://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/

Title: Seven degrees of silence

Author: Matthew Goulish

Section: Pausing Time/Timing the Pause: sayability in the arts, philosophy, and politics

Abstract: This essay traces a journey through "degrees" – inflections and qualities – of silence in relation to language and image, drawn from close observation of instances in Jon Fosse's *Septology* and Nobel lecture *A Silent Language*, Henri Bergson's sense of time and the sentence, Sarah Ruden's new translation of the Gospels, the nonvocal songs of birds, the last lithograph by American artist Charles White, apophatic theology, a scene from a 1932 Laurel & Hardy film, and autobiographical associations that arise out of this constellation of case studies.

Keywords: Fosse; silence; Charles White; apophatic theology; Deleuze

Received: 10 October, 2024.

Accepted: 28 April, 2025.

Published: 15 July, 2025.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Seven degrees of silence

Matthew Goulish[1]

Abstract

This essay traces a journey through "degrees" – inflections and qualities – of silence in relation to language and image, drawn from close observation of instances in Jon Fosse's *Septology* and Nobel lecture *A Silent Language*, Henri Bergson's sense of time and the sentence, Sarah Ruden's new translation of the Gospels, the nonvocal songs of birds, the last lithograph by American artist Charles White, apophatic theology, a scene from a 1932 Laurel & Hardy film, and autobiographical associations that arise out of this constellation of case studies.

Keywords: Fosse; silence; Charles White; apophatic theology; Deleuze

Before writing this I looked at a photograph: a small rectangular 4th grade class photo – Steve Bronson, age 8 or, like me, 9, in 1969, in industrial southern Michigan. Steve glued his photo to a varnished board. Below it he affixed a tag with his printed name, as did seven other friends. I knew Steve had initiated the project. His photo was first, and across the top of the board he had written in black marker.

From your friends at Harrington school we're sorry your leaving Matt.

They gave me the memento on the occasion of my family moving away, across the state, which in 1969 had a feeling of finality that has proven accurate. I have never again seen any of them, although I think of them often, and obviously I kept the board. It hangs – a stiff wire attached to the back of it – in my study. I looked at Steve in particular. A memory had taken hold of me of Steve called on to read aloud in class. He stands at his desk. He struggles to speak every word, mispronouncing, repeating, hesitating, tense and straining to breathe, his voice transformed, unrecognizable, labored and choking. Jon Fosse begins his Nobel lecture with a similar autobiographical episode.

> My teacher asked me to read a passage aloud, and as if out of nowhere I felt terrified. It was completely overpowering – it was like I disappeared into the terror and nothing else was left of me. I stood up and ran out of the room.[2]

Septology, Fosse's seven-part novel, includes a slightly fictionalized version of the episode. Unlike Fosse's forgiving teachers who excuse him henceforth from aloud reading, our Mr. Horton sat back at his desk, waiting, which is to say forcing Steve to read to the end of the passage. It happened more than once. With each repetition, a dreadful stillness overcame all the other students. As the poet Diane Seuss

[1] School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

[2] Fosse, *A Silent Language*, 21.

has written, "I guess now that would be called *trauma*, a word I've grown to hate."[3]

What might that difference – between escaping or not escaping a crushing moment – mean for the life to follow from that childhood? I thought even then about the pointless cruelty, how neither Steve nor anyone else would benefit from it, how it even made everything worse, caused lasting damage. I had witnessed another moment of suspicious interaction between Mr. Horton and Steve, as Mr. Horton walked out of the teacher's toilet with the front of his pants left undone, his belt hanging open, underwear showing, and a smirk on his face that I had never seen in class, walking this way past Steve and me at our coat-hooks in a small hallway area preparing to leave for the day, nobody else around. I noticed Steve looking down as if ashamed. There seemed to be something hidden between them. I wondered whether Mr. Horton's harsh treatment of Steve in class had something to do with this hiddenness. I could not make sense of it. I see how Steve printed his name, letter by letter, on the friend board while the other seven names appear as nascent cursive signatures. I notice the mistake of the possessive – *sorry your leaving* – instead of the contraction of you are. We did not call it dyslexia then. I have no memory of doing anything in particular to help, having no idea what would have constituted helping. Maybe at the age of 9 consolation comes only in the form of noticing. Although I did not acknowledge, I suppose I did not disregard. We continued to play together on the playground, and maybe that sufficed. For whatever reason Steve seemed to feel my departure acutely enough to organize the friend board as a parting gift. I left and left him to his doom, but what control did we have over our lives at age 8 or 9 in 1969 in industrial southern Michigan? Only what we say and do on the playground, perhaps, only how we play, and take play as our domain, and dimly grasp its significance. Maybe I am repaying the debt now in writing this, describing moments I have carried all these years, recalling Steve Bronson's humiliation as the brutality of speech compelled, a moment that would have been better as silence.

The happy fortune in the invitation to participate in a conference arrived into my glowing inbox in the fourth watch of the night as the Gospels say. My teaching schedule necessitates rising in the pre-dawn darkness, one of winter's signatures, of a Chicago morning. The philosophy conference would address "silence, utterability and politics, with a special reference to Jon Fosse's thought." I had coincidentally begun reading *Septology* some weeks before. In the immediate aftermath of the decision to accept the invitation, the title *Seven degrees of silence* presented itself. The word silence dissatisfied me. I composed a list of correspondences.

breath

movement

translation

darkness

Advent

messenger

hodie

Recalling the labored breathing of my guiltless friend Steve Bronson implicates one of the several degrees of silence invoked by Jon Fosse in his Nobel lecture, the one that speaks to the origin of his writing in that moment of terror, as a realization that language

[3] Seuss, "Rhapsody," 77.

had been taken from him, that he could through writing reclaim it. Writing, like philosophy, begins in silence. Philosophy as I understand it has no language of its own. It strives to align the languages of other disciplines with the most advanced among them. It makes a claim in doing so to both a movement of progress and a foundational silence, the silence of origin, of listening to the words of other disciplines, listening for misalignment, a generative problem. I listened in this way to Steve Bronson as he gulped for air, which it seemed his body would not allow him to take in, between each unpronounceable word. Urgency overcomes me, the desire to say everything, impossibly, all at once, as any sequence, as sequence itself, and with it the idea of conclusion, mutilates the concepts and sunders their intertwined existence. Concepts precondition the impulse to write, to differentiate seven degrees that flow without transition.

I understand Fosse's process of reclaiming a language out of silence as a quest for fidelity to particulars of movement. Punctuation guides and conditions the course of any writing. Those fine extra-linguistic markings – comma, period, dash, colon, semi-colon – function like a score. They leave their trace in a sentence becoming sensible to breath, pronouncable through timing and affect. Encountering *Septology*, which its English translator Damion Searls described as "a seven hundred-page sentence," presents a problem.[4] A sentence defines, or contains, the present. The course of a sentence reflects how time moves through us. I am thinking of Henri Bergson who said memory "is not a thing; it is progress; it is movement."[5] In 1911, he introduced one idea this way.

> My present, at this moment, is this sentence I am pronouncing. But it is so because I want to limit the field of my attention to my sentence. This attention is something that *can be made longer or shorter* […] an attention which could be extended indefinitely would embrace, along with the preceding sentence, all the anterior phrases of the lecture and the events which preceded the lecture, and as large a portion of *what we call* our past *as desired.*

The following year Bergson formulated the logical end of the idea, imagining a single sentence "lasting for years."

"I believe that our whole physical existence is something just like this single sentence, continued since the first awakening of consciousness, interspersed with commas, but never broken by full stops. And consequently I believe that our whole past still exists." Bergson could be describing *Septology*, including the way the narrator's past at times overtakes the present, arising out of his eidetic consciousness, so often preceded by a phrase like that which begins the novel.

> And I see myself standing and looking at the picture with the two lines that cross in the middle, one purple line, one brown line, it's a painting wider than it is high and I see that I've painted the lines slowly…[6]

What Asle, this narrator, sees that commences the narration, himself standing and looking, immediately becomes displaced by what the self that he sees looking looks at: the painting. This flow of language, its endlessness, unspools from the visual in a temporal elasticity that actualizes Bergson's dream of convergence of existence and syntax – a lifelong sentence. It

[4] Fooks, "Casting the spell."
[5] Ó Maoilearca, *Vestiges of a Philosophy*, 44.
[6] Fosse, *The Other Name*, 11.

obliterates the microsilence of the common interval between the end of one sentence and the start of the next, and amplifies another interval, necessarily coincident with the off-switch in the narrator's consciousness when sleep overtakes him. Prayer, often in Latin, precedes this mid-sentence stop. The familiar lines of the Ave Maria afford the final words of *Septology* a projection beyond the end.

> Ora pro nobis peccatoribus
> nunc et in hora[7]

"Pray for us sinners now and at the hour." The words *mortis nostrae*, "of our death" would have followed, or do follow, in the silence of the void after the book's last page. This ending retrospectively confirms that the preceding events – balancing accounts, putting things in order, delivering last paintings to the gallery, revisiting necessary memories, a life in recapitulation prompted by the completion of the tilted cross – have constituted preparation for that other silence, the silence of leaving the world.

What does it mean to discover one's own words in the words of prayer? Although they do not coincide perfectly, the six interleaved breaks align *Septology*'s seven parts with the days of the week. We could think of a Book of Days, tracking secular moments with the church calendar, reminding of times for specific prayers, assigning days to their respective saints, pairing unmeasured existence with chronometric contemplation. The two intersecting lines of the painting will be understood as a Saltire Cross, a cross turned on its diagonal, associated with Saint Andrew. The saint, the legend goes, professing his unworthiness at the moment of his martyrdom, refused the same manner of crucifixion as Jesus and achieved his dying wish of a cross askew. The silence of beginning, out of which the words of the book issue, takes the form of image. It follows that darkness, allowing the apprehension of no image, thus the generation of no words, constitutes the form of the silence, perhaps peacefulness, of ending.

As so often happens with books, a volume had found its way to me in time for me to read while reading *Septology* that proved itself the perfect companion, as if delivered by an unseen messenger. In 2023 Sarah Ruden published her new translation of *The Gospels*, introducing her efforts this way.

> As a Quaker – a member of perhaps the least theological, most practical religious movement in the world – I'm supposed to be open to looking first at a thing in itself, whether it's a head of Swiss chard, money, a gun, a book, a belief, or anything else. As a Quaker translator, I would like to deal with the Gospels more straightforwardly than is customary.[8]

After such a preamble, one must consider translation in every moment of reading, despite the resistance of the original texts to such attempted pragmatism. The fact of translation counters the tendency in philosophy and writing to believe that the neutralization of context purifies every sentence and utterance. Are not nations with their languages, "or do they not remain, contexts, and is not the occasion of translation one in which the difference of context is limitlessly at stake?"[9] Jon Fosse has spoken about writing in Nynorsk, the vernacular Norwegian of the rural and western areas with its roots in Old Norse, unrelated to Danish like the more eastern and urban Bokmål. He speaks about a plurality of languages as enriching, like a diversity of species of trees or birds. "Translation is the one language which is

[7] Fosse, *A New Name*, 197.
[8] Ruden, *The Gospels*, xiii.
[9] Cavell, "Silences Noises Voices," 112.

common to everyone," he stated.[10] One might make the necessary argument that translation constitutes at least two languages common to everyone. The parallel tasks of Damion Searls in translating *Septology* from Nynorsk and Sarah Ruden in translating the Gospels from ancient Koinē – the "Common" Greek dialect – seem antithetical yet converge like a triangle into my English.

For the titles in the novel *Trilogy*, Fosse employed old Nynorsk words "on their way into obsolescence."[11] The third part's title, translated as *Weariness*, *Kveldsvævd*, refers to a specific form of tiredness "early in the evening, and is also the term for flowers closing up at night as protection against the dark." Cecilie Seiness, quoted here from her introduction to *Trilogy,* notes that in the original Nynorsk, *kveldsvævd* lacks the "elevated, intellectual register of the scientific word in English," the botanical term "nyctinastic," describing the periodic movement of flowers or leaves caused by nightly changes in light intensity or temperature. Such intricacies of vocabulary inform my reluctance regarding the word silence with its multiple distinct meanings. Even an "elevated, intellectual register" would not bother me were a better word available, for the silence of listening or looking, out of which writing makes itself known. "Stridulation" comes to mind, the song-like sounds birds or insects make with body parts. A cricket rubs its legs together. Theologian and philosopher Charles Hartshorne, in his volume *Born to Sing – An Interpretation and World Survey of Bird Song*, refers to "nonvocal song," "wing music," and "a form of signaling." He goes so far as to include "a woodpecker tapping on wood or on a metal gutter."[12] This perhaps points a way to the "silent language" arising out of his classroom terror that Fosse contemplates in his Nobel lecture. Fosse, like Asle in *Septology*, had converted to Catholicism in adulthood, at the age of 54, introducing the Reformation's trademark anabaptism into the religion while at the same time depending so profoundly on Catholicism's rituals, prayers, and (eidetic) imagery. In his 1993 essay *Negative Mysticism*, Fosse wrote of the influence of Norwegian Puritanism, in particular his Grandfather's Quaker practice, on his writing.

On "a small island in Skjold, Ryfylke County, where the Quakers had a stronghold when he was growing up," Fosse's mother's father "was marked by the Quaker faith all his life."[13]

Fosse writes:

> Speech can easily be understood as the outer or secular part, while writing is the inner, the personal level. Speech is social. Writing is individual. […] Puritanism places great importance on the inner and the personal. The Quakers talk about the inner light, for instance, at the meetings nothing at all needs to be said, it may be a *silent meeting* as they call it. […] the participants sit silently in a circle, it may happen that someone says something during the meeting, it may happen that no one says anything. […] It is not the speech, the outer, but the inner feelings, the *inner light*, as the Quakers put it, that the meeting has been about.

In *Septology* Asle uses the words *inner light* to describe the essential aspirational quality of his paintings, what they must radiate. Here's a passage from near the end of the second book.

[10] Fosse borrows the formulation from Horace Engdahl, the Secretary of the Swedish Academy. "Seagulls and spruce," 126.
[11] Fosse, *Trilogy,* xi.
[12] Hartshorne, *Born to Sing*, 28.
[13] Fosse, "Negative Mysticism," 43, 48-49.

> …when I went to The Art School they said you should never paint with black because it's not a color, they said, but black, yes, how could I ever have painted my pictures without black? no, I don't understand it, because it's in the darkness that God lives, yes, God is darkness, and that darkness, God's darkness, yes, that nothingness, yes, it shines, yes, it's from God's darkness that the light comes, the invisible light, I think and I think that this is all just something I've thought up, yes, obviously, I think and I think that at the same time this light is like a fog, because a fog can shine too, yes, if it's a good picture then there's something like a shining darkness or a shining fog either in it, in the picture, or coming from the picture, yes, that's what it's like, I think, and without this light, yes, then it's a bad picture, but actually there's no light you can see, maybe, or is it that only I can see it, no one else can? or maybe some other people can too? but most other people don't see it, or even if they do sort of see it it's without knowing it, yes, I'm completely sure about that, they see it but they don't realize that it's a shining darkness they're seeing and they think that it's something else, that's how it is, and even though I don't understand why it's at night, in the darkness, that God shows himself…[14]

In Sarah Ruden's translation of the Luke Gospel, the angel of the annunciation says to Mary:

> The power of the highest one will send a shadow over you.[15]

Ruden translates "angel" as "messenger," and in a footnote she elucidates, "A shadow or shade is a Hebrew Bible image of protection."

I decided to write to a friend in Texas. Steven Tomlinson had recently completed his ordination in Austin and accepted an assignment to serve a congregation 91 miles (146 kilometers) away in rural Columbus. Steven had written me that he had read *Septology* and in order to experience it a second time was listening to it as an audiobook. These ideas, of God showing himself in darkness, of benevolent darkness, of speaking in silence, of Asle's hesitant perception and expression, both his certainty and doubt regarding his knowledge of God, brought to mind the word *apophasis.* Apophatic theology asserts that humans cannot fully *define* or comprehend God, but I sought a definition tested by a practice of theology, that "discourse on God, and on things in their relation to God," a form of inquiry that takes God as starting-point.[16]

"I think one or more (or all) of my seven approaches to silence might be informed by apophatic theology," I wrote to Steven. "I expect I can return to Augustine, but I have not read at all widely enough to know how to begin to think about this in the most exact way."

I received Steven's response before the end of the day.

"I asked your question of my friend Tony Baker, my theologian on speed-dial. His reply is attached."[17]

The attachment was a 5 minute and 30 second sound file. I had around this time entered the word "silence" in a search of the website for the Art Institute of Chicago collection. Along with the idea that a visual image of a certain potency could offer the silencing effect that might resuscitate language,

[14] Fosse, *The Other Name,* 326.
[15] Ruden, *The Gospels*, 165.
[16] Carlisle, *Spinoza's Religion,* 12, 8, and 9.
[17] Goulish, correspondence with Steven Tomlinson and Anthony Baker, March 21, 2024.

thus representing a generative form of silence, call it wonder, out of which writing could appear, came the search for images knowing themselves as silence. The search delivered a series of lithographs from 1978 titled "Sound of Silence" by the revered, pioneering African-American artist Charles White. His late works present figures in dignified if mysterious portraiture paired with a single non-human element, like the Catholic icons of saints with their emblematic object: Saint Barbara holding a replica of the tower in which she was imprisoned, Saint Andrew holding the angled cross of his death.

"Sound of Silence" shows a young man facing forward. In front of him, a shell floats, possibly from a whelk, although slightly abstracted. His hands frame it. The gesture perhaps suggests that he has the magician's power to levitate the shell there before his chest. When the sea snail has departed, it leaves its house, once its body, behind. As children we held it to our ear to hear the distant roar inside that we called the sea, that indistinct sound that Leibniz spoke of, that suggests a proliferation, many instances of one small sound – the particularity of blur, distinct in its quality of vagueness, that, when we hear before seeing, tells us we are near the ocean.

> To hear this noise as we do, we must hear the parts which make up this whole, that is the noise of each wave, although each of these little noises makes itself known only when combined confusedly with all the others, and would not be noticed if the wave which made it were by itself.[18]

In the last year of his life, in failing health, Charles White completed seventeen versions of "Sound of Silence," obsessive permutations, displacing any possibility of one definitive version. I sent an inquiry to the curator of prints and drawings, Mark Pascale, who had purchased all seventeen works for the museum. He replied as follows.

> My thought about why White obsessed over the image centers on his mastery of lithographic drawing, and his close association with the printer [David Panosh], who was game to work tirelessly on separate versions of the image. It's kind of his apotheosis in the medium, showing how a single drawing can be stretched by color variation and context, each one meaning something unique. The full color version is his ideal, commercial statement […] a beautiful, cerebral celebration of longing, beauty, and the harrowing history of Black Americans. For me, the silence and shell indicate or echo past horrors, but also suggest hope. […] the young man wears a hesitant expression, his powerful hands and gesture revealing the shell, implies something magical, potentially and eternally positive.[19]

American artists of White's generation seldom spoke interpretively about their work, reluctant to specify their intentions in the manner that has become an expectation for younger artists. Mark Pascale describes the young man as "revealing the shell," as if opening his garment to do so. It could be his heart floating outside of his body. He centers himself around it. I wonder about his youthfulness, depicted by the artist at the age of 61. It could be an image of his own youthful soul, still so present to him, as his body empties out like the shell. It could be a son, standing in for the next generation, a witness and inheritor of his work, encoded as the advent of the shell, its arrival in full and finished form, rendered complete by the artist's death. Advent, the darkest time of the season in the northern hemisphere, the four Sundays

[18] Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, 54.
[19] Goulish, correspondence with Mark Pascale, May 27-28, 2024.

Charles White's "Sound of Silence" (NEWSPRINT GREY version).

preceding Christmas in the Christian church year, the shortening days before the turning of the solstice, make up the setting of the *Septology* week. Beyer the gallery director tells Asle that the weeks of Advent are the most advantageous time to show his paintings, the most likely time of year to make art sales. I think of the word now in its original Latin meaning of an arrival to celebrate.

One distinguished student of White, the painter Kerry James Marshall, wrote of his teacher.

> The labor, the work, in Charlie's drawings is palpable. One can follow the process through his technique and understand exactly how the image came to be on the page or the canvas. An atmosphere of stillness and quietude envelops the space in and around the work. He often said your work should be about things that mattered, but reminded us all to concentrate on making the best drawings we could, adding, "the ideas will take care of themselves."[20]

Here is a reproduction of Charles White's "Sound of Silence" (NEWSPRINT GREY version), followed by my transcription of the sound file sent by theologian Anthony Baker in response to my request for an explanation of apophatic theology.

[20] Marshall, "A Black artist named White," 19.

So sometimes apophasis is seen as a type of theology and contrasted with cataphatic theology, and I think that's a mistake – that there is a contrast, but I don't think it's right to see it as a *kind* of theology rather than as the… well I think it's the… it's better to see it as something like the transcendent edge of all good theology. In other words, theology's task is to speak well of God, and in doing so you would be failing if you didn't acknowledge the limits of human language itself to say the thing: to speak well of God. So part of speaking well is acknowledging the inability of human language to *ultimately* speak well of God.

I think that the primary places – or not primary, but some of the most, um, *energetic* maybe places where you see this showing up in the theological tradition are in Augustine, as you noted, who writes for instance a book *On the Trinity* and the whole book – it's a big fat book – and the whole book is about him finding earthly metaphors, images, analogies for the trinity including let's take a very close look at human love and human thinking as an analogy of the trinity and each time he finds one he comes back and says ah but that doesn't work and here's why. And at the end in Book XV, when he's been through all of this, he suggests that he has failed every single time and maybe the most appropriate thing for human language to do when it's attempting to describe the triune God is to fail, and acknowledge the way that it failed. And so failing to speak well of God is a way of acknowledging God, a way of praising God, ultimately for him.

The dual fundamental idea of apophasis is: the being of God is beyond human language, and so apophasis, when it's been our theology, has a way of continuing to use our human language but in a way that ultimately ascribes its own limitations.

A very key text for the whole tradition is, when it comes to language – so I think of those as sort of describing the appropriateness of apophasis because it's due to the being of God. So then the question becomes how *do* we speak of God. How does theology even continue if it's all got this sort of apophatic edge, and that is where Pseudo-Dionysius writes a book called *Divine Names*, and what he does in *Divine Names* is he suggests three steps in articulating an understanding of God. The first step is to affirm something of God. God *is* good. The second step is when you have that moment of, as I said, of realizing that because of who God is, God is beyond all that language. So the second step is to say, ah but "good" means it was a good game, and the pie is good, and I'm feeling pretty good today, and none of these come close to describing the goodness of God, so I need to take it away. I need to remove that word from God. If goodness is limited to the way I use it as human, then God is *not* good. But then his final step is to say – and this is the *Divine Names* bit – if this term that I'm using is true of God in any way, it must be true of God in the way that actually defines the term itself. So God is ultimately goodness itself. God is good, but God is not good in the way that I normally use the term good, it must be that God is goodness itself. In this Dionysius says, that means this is true of God in a way that I can't actually understand. I don't *know* what it means to call God good, but this becomes an act of faith to say that somewhere beyond my ability to attribute words to God, God is good.

Gregory of Nyssa, the *Life of Moses*, turns Moses's assent up Mount Sinai into a whole analogy of climbing in life,

> climbing through life, climbing through our own embodiment, into the image of the cloud on top of Sinai which is God's presence. He calls this "the dazzling darkness of God." And the point is that you don't ever come to the back, like that this is, you come into this – and this even connects with John of the Cross and *The Dark Night of the Soul* – this moment of realizing that all my attempts to understand well the God that I'm worshipping come in the end to an endless cloud of recognizing my own inability to understand these things.

Silence, darkness: I recall another formative memory, more from youth than childhood. I devoted hours to watching comedy films made well before my birth, rerun on Sunday morning local television. One moment persists: the climactic scene of *Pack Up Your Troubles*, 1932, in the aftermath of an unintentional bank robbery performed, through a series of blunders and misunderstandings, by Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. Believing the police in hot pursuit, they arrive home in a frenzy. Ollie says to Stan, "Come on get that trunk and then get it packed, we've got to get out of here!" As Ollie hurries into the kitchen, Stan drags a large trunk out of the closet. He goes inside the closet to gather their clothing. Ollie returns at a run and as he does so slams the closet door. Stan, now inside the darkened closet, finds that he cannot open the door. He begins frantically pounding on it. Ollie hears the knocking, and with an air of resignation opens the front door only to find nobody there. His face becomes quizzical as he hears the urgent knocking continue. He looks at the closet. He strides across the room and resolutely opens the closet door. Stan stumbles out, holding some coats and shirts. Ollie, exasperated, demands, "What are you trying to do?" Stan replies helplessly, "I got locked in." "Why didn't you tell me it was you?" Ollie ask, as if the question were entirely self-evident. Stan replies, "Well it was so dark I didn't think you'd hear me." Spoken in a voice of such desolation, the logic appears unassailable.

Fosse begins his essay *Negative Mysticism* with these lines:

> There is, and this is perhaps also the most important, and best to keep silent about, something which easily becomes distorted and something else than what it is if mentioned, perhaps it even goes so wrong that when we try to say it, it becomes something which excludes what we knew in the unspoken. What we cannot say, we shall keep silent about, Wittgenstein said. While Derrida says that what we cannot say, we shall write. I understand, in my own way, what they both mean.[21]

In his Nobel lecture, Fosse writes:

> …there is silent language in the novels, behind the written language, and if I'm writing well then I am necessarily writing this silent language too. […] In *Septology* this silent language is what says that the first Asle and the second Asle might be the same person…[22]

The first Asle, the sober one, follows an uneasy intuition and returns to check on the second Asle, the one who drinks too much. He finds him, this double, unconscious in a snow drift and delivers him to the clinic. "We all have our trauma nadir, the umbilicus from which everything originates," writes Diane Seuss, the poet.[23] She means, I think, the moment we do not know how we, or if we, survived. We carry

[21] Fosse, "Negative Mysticism," 42.
[22] Fosse, *A Silent Language,* 27.
[23] Seuss, *frank: sonnets*, 61.

it for the length of a life, silently, unrecovered. It continues to shape us through its irreversible damage, in the remorse of knowing that it could have been otherwise. It was not otherwise, and we are and are not different from it. "To speak of it in mixed company, well, it's just not done." I stand here impossibly now as an adult, this sentence my present. Memories take hold of me, prompted by this bifurcated narrator, this doubled Asle, these Saltire Cross paths of two lives intersecting as one. I recall childhood assurances of a watchful guardian, a protective angel assigned to me whom I even on occasion could see, so I claimed to my mother's alarm, although she did not disbelieve me. It comes in pale blue light, I said, through the bedroom upper window when it's quiet. In the aftermath of those early pages of *Septology*, of Asle discovering Asle near death in the snow, I wondered if we might be angels to ourselves, returning as adults to the nadir, as we might in a therapeutic recollection, delivering to our younger selves the wordless message that we will grow into other times, not dominated by damage, and that through some inter-dimensional ripple of allowance, some jagged premonition, we as children saw ourselves return, the spectral future presence a reassurance.

Sarah Ruden's translation of the Gospels includes what she calls *A Discursive Glossary of Unfamiliar Word Choices in English* with the following entry for Angel.

> This English word comes from the ordinary Greek word for 'messenger' or 'announcer,' *aggelos*, which is used throughout Greek scripture, including in the Septuagint, for heavenly functionaries who mediate God's will to mortals."[24]

Ruden revised the familiar line from The Lord's Prayer in its first appearance in the Matthew Gospel, a line which appears in Latin at the closing of most of the *Septology* volumes: Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie, which translates as *Give us this day our daily bread.* In Ruden's version, Jesus dictates, "Give us today tomorrow's loaf of bread." She comments as follows.

> There is no good basis for translating this adjective as 'daily'; a word expressing the idea of 'a future' or 'tomorrow's' loaf appears the best choice among several not very satisfactory ones inherited from manuscript and interpretive traditions left very unsettled.[25]

The Latin word *hodie*, a noun meaning "this present day," and an adverb, "on or in the course of this present day," brings to mind, on those occasions when I hear it, usually sung in an Advent hymn, philosophy's concept of haecceity. Medieval Franciscan Duns Scotus gave us the term for a principal of "thisness," a concept of uniqueness under which only one object falls – separating one horse from other horses, one leaf from other leaves, one human from other humans.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze attended closely to Duns Scotus. Deleuze's expanded consideration of haecceity as presubjective and applying to events finds its distilled definition with Félix Guattari's co-authorship in *A Thousand Plateaus.*

> There is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance. We reserve the name *haecceity* for it. A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist

[24] Ruden, *The Gospels*, xli.
[25] *Ibid*., 83.

> entirely of relations of movement and rest […], capacities to affect and be affected.[26]

The phrase, "capacities to affect and be affected," references Spinoza, as the book's translator Brian Massumi notes.

> *L'affect* (Spinoza's *affectus*) is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act.[27]

A catalogue of recognizable seasons proposes an equally endless and recognizable catalogue of capacities to affect and be affected, those tropisms between bodies that would overcome our divides through the affects we have on one another, with a "we" that precedes feeling but includes the person and the day. An inward practice of philosophy devotes itself less to what we understand and more to how. "All the waves are different, and all the clouds are different," muses Asle in *Septology*.[28]

And now this line from a prayer, so familiar to me as to all who experienced their due Catholic catechisms, has been reinscribed. *Give us tomorrow's loaf of bread today.* I hear in it, and say in it when I say it, a yearning for the reception, perhaps the recognition, of "a word expressing the idea of 'a future,' " the sustenance for the day of the most immediate future, invested in and nesting – shall we say silently? – "on or in the course of this present day." In this way it affirms as prayers affirm that as tomorrow takes up its residence in today we will know this bread, our capacity to affect and be affected, as a blessing and a grace.

References

Carlisle, Clare. *Spinoza's Religion.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021.

Cavell, Stanley. "Silences Noises Voices." *Here and There: sites of philosophy.* Edited by Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2022.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism & schizophrenia.* Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Fooks, Georgina. "Casting the spell: Damion Searls on translating Jon Fosse's A Shining." *Asymptote Journal*, November 23, 2023.

Fosse, Jon. "Seagulls and spruce." *An Angel Walks Through the Stage and Other Essays.* Translated by May-Brit Akerholt. Victoria, TX, London, Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015.

——. "Negative Mysticism." *An Angel Walks Through the Stage and Other Essays.*

——. *The Other Name: Septology I – II.* Translated by Damion Searls. Oakland, CA: Transit Books, 2019.

——. *I Is Another: Septology III – V.* Translated by Damion Searls. Oakland, CA: Transit Books, 2020.

——. *A New Name: Septology VI – VII.* Translated by Damion Searls. Oakland, CA: Transit Books, 2021.

——. *Trilogy.* Translated by May-Brit Akerholt, introduction by Cecilie Seiness. Dallas, TX and Rochester, NY: Dalkey Archive Press, 2022.

[26] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 261.
[27] *Ibid.*, xvi.
[28] Fosse, *I Is Another,* 199.

——. *A Silent Language: The Nobel Lecture.* Translated by Damion Searls. Berkeley, CA: Transit Books, 2024.

Hartshorne, Charles. *Born to Sing – An Interpretation and World Survey of Bird Song.* Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Ó Maoilearca, John. *Vestiges of a Philosophy: matter, the meta-spiritual, and the forgotten Bergson.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Leibniz, G. W. *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Marshall, Kerry James. "A Black artist named White." *Charles White – A Retrospective.* Edited by Sarah Kelly Oehler and Esther Adler. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2018.

Pack Up Your Troubles, written by H. M. Walker and Stan Laurel, directed by George Marshall and Raymond McCarey, Hal Roach Studios, 1932.

Ruden, Sarah. *The Gospels, a new translation.* New York: Modern Library, 2021.

Seuss, Diane. *frank: sonnets.* Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2021.

——. "Rhapsody." *Modern Poetry*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2024.

White, Charles. *Sound of Silence*, 1978, Color lithograph on gray wove paper, Inscribed verso, lower right, in graphite: "NEWSPRINT GREY", Image: 62.3 × 62.5 cm (24 9/16 × 24 5/8 in.); Sheet: 63.5 × 89.6 cm (25 × 35 5/16 in.), Margaret Fisher Fund, Accession Number 2017.310, © The Charles White Archives Inc., The Art Institute of Chicago.

Copyright © 2025 Goulish.

Correspondence: Matthew Goulish, email: mgouli@artic.edu.

Received: 10 October, 2024.

Accepted: 28 April, 2025.

Financial statement: The scholarship for this article was conducted at the author's own expense.

Competing interests: The author has declared no competing interests.

How to cite: Goulish, Matthew. "Seven degrees of silence." *Inscriptions* 8, no. 2 (July 2025): 25–36. https://doi.org/10.59391/inscriptions.v8i2.282.